

12 deaths blamed on winter storm; storm turns southeast Colorado into white wasteland

Contributed by 1st Lt. Jeff Roberson
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DENVER - The Civil Air Patrol was again flying Monday over roads in eastern Colorado to look for any other drivers stranded by a blizzard that left up to 10-foot snowdrifts in some areas, while plows tried to dig roads out from a thick blanket of snow.

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"Life and safety are still the No. 1 priorities. We need to get the roads open so people can get out and deal with the situation," said Dick Vnuk, chief of operations for the state Division of Emergency Management.

"We don't think we have people stranded any more out there, we think we've got them all. But the Civil Air Patrol is making flights to make sure," Vnuk said.

An incident management team that moved into Lamar on Sunday night was huddling Monday to reassess residents' and farmers' immediate needs. A regional emergency manager, who himself was snowed in by the storm, was joining that team Monday, Vnuk said.

The Division of Emergency Management said 658 people -- many of whom had been rescued from stranded vehicles -- had spent Saturday night in shelters around the area. The shelters began clearing out as major highways reopened Sunday, Vnuk said.

Up to a dozen Civil Air Patrol planes flew search patterns over the area Sunday, and crews spotted two stranded vehicles with five people near the Kansas border -- along with several commercial trucks whose crews chose to stay with their rigs, said patrol spokesman 1st Lt. Steve Hamilton.

On Monday, the Civil Air Patrol had six planes flying in Kit Carson County, where there had been reports of more people stranded along Interstate 70, which reopened Sunday for the first time in two days, Hamilton said.

He said some of the planes are equipped with infrared heat-sensing equipment to help spot any stranded livestock. Civil Air Patrol crews can radio the location of stranded people or livestock to the National Guard, which then can bring emergency supplies or make rescues by helicopter or special tracked vehicles, he said.

Colorado Department of Transportation spokeswoman Stacey Stegman said officials expect to open U.S. 287 and U.S. 160 later Monday. The roads, which intersect near Springfield, are major north-south and east-west routes, respectively, in the southeastern corner of the state.

Gov. Bill Owens, who flew over the area Sunday morning, described the scene as a white wasteland, with little sign of life outside scattered towns.

"It's just completely covered with snow," he said during a phone interview from a state airplane. "You can't see where certain state highways are, you can only tell because of the telephone poles."

He said the biggest immediate concern was making sure any remaining people trapped in vehicles because of the storm were rescued. The storm's effect on agriculture also is a big concern, with worries the deep snow, which was sculpted into drifts more than 10 feet high in some areas, may have killed cattle.

"You can get around within the towns," Owens said at a news conference after the flight. "There are a lot of isolated farmhouses that if they need help will be difficult to get them out or us in."

The National Guard was using Humvees, large trucks and special tracked vehicles to rescue trapped people and resupply shelters.

The storm buried the foothills west of Denver with more than 2 feet of snow in areas. But blizzard conditions and high winds slammed southeastern Colorado until the storm moved northeast into Kansas early Sunday.

Forecasters expected mostly clear skies around the state with temperatures rising into the 30s in the southeast and winds up to 15 mph. Warmer weather was expected through the week the National Weather Service said.

Through Sunday afternoon, many roads in eastern Colorado and western Kansas remained closed, but interstates 70 and 25 both fully reopened Sunday.

"Southeast Colorado ... has really been hit hard. Colorado is doing everything it can to get resources into that part of the state to help them out," said Owens, who declared a statewide disaster emergency both for the latest storm and for the pre-Christmas blizzard a week earlier.

Maj. Gen. Mason Whitney, adjutant general of the Colorado National Guard, said troops had rescued 44 people Friday and Saturday, and said other rescues had been performed by motorists, snowplow drivers, local law enforcement and other officials. He said some truckers had chosen to stay with their vehicles so they could get moving again as soon as roads were passable.